

Wellness Notes

Leukemia*

(Part II)

- **Who Is at Risk?**

No one knows why some people develop leukemia and others do not. However, scientists have identified some risk factors for the disease. A risk factor is anything that increases a person's chances of developing a disease. Most people who have known risk factors do not get leukemia, while many who do get the disease have none of these risk factors.

Studies have identified the following risk factors for leukemia: older, male, white, working with certain chemicals, smoking, exposure to very high levels of radiation, certain health conditions, and past treatment with chemotherapy or radiation therapy. More than 65 percent of people diagnosed with leukemia are over 55. Leukemia occurs more often in men than women and is more common among white people than other races.

Chronic exposure to certain chemicals may lead to the development of leukemia. Benzene is a widely used chemical that has been linked to leukemia. Benzene is usually found in low levels in the general environment. However, areas around gasoline stations, high vehicular traffic, and industrial sources may have higher levels. Benzene is also found in tobacco smoke. It is estimated that about half of the benzene exposure in the United States is from cigarette smoke. Smoking is a risk factor for leukemia.

Certain disorders and genetic diseases, such as Down syndrome, may increase the risk of leukemia. About 3 out of 10 people with a blood disorder known as myelodysplastic syndrome develop acute myeloid leukemia. In this disorder, as in leukemia, abnormal cells are formed in the bone marrow and too few healthy blood cells enter the bloodstream.

Although chemotherapy and radiation therapy have been helpful to a lot of people in the treatment of many forms of cancer, they have been linked to the development of second cancers, including leukemia, many years after treatment. Chemotherapy for a first cancer is a stronger risk factor for developing leukemia later than is radiation therapy.

Radiation therapy may increase a person's chance of developing leukemia. Several factors influence this risk, such as the dose of radiation administered. A person's age at the time of therapy does not seem to be a risk factor for leukemia.

Should you have any questions, it is important that you speak with your doctor about them.